

Language revitalization in China¹

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Abstract

All communities offer valuable cultural and economic potential capable of enhancing the collective wealth of society. Language itself is a valuable resource and a contributing factor towards the sustainable development of a people. The role of a language in society is significant as a vehicle for the exchange of information and facilitating the transmission of knowledge. It is an indelible expression of life that conveys core values, builds ambition and spurs invention essential to strengthening the aspirations of a people. Detailing the vibrancy of a culture and revealing the intimacy of a heritage, language stimulates the generation of ideas vital to the creation of a strong social infrastructure. Revitalizing indigenous languages is a component critical to strengthening many ethnic minority communities on the margins of society who struggle to retain their identity. They are challenged by conflicting traditional and foreign values and face discrimination that limits their opportunities for success. To maximize the value of local traditions, a greater fiscal incentive must be offered to alleviate economic hardship and ensure responsible growth. Initiatives that intend to revitalize indigenous languages focus on long-term growth opportunities to revive the local community, and aim to enhance the quality of education by emphasizing the value of local skill.

Introduction

In partnership with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, UNESCO has been protecting ethnic minority languages of China while, at the same time, supporting economic development in the ethnic minority areas. The purpose of this approach has been to ensure the long-term function and existence of these languages among both the local community and research specialists.

Overview of UNESCO's actions for indigenous languages:

UNESCO's mission regarding language includes saving the linguistic heritage of humanity by encouraging its use in the creation and dissemination of information and culture and supporting multilingualism at the earliest age, wherever that is possible. The Plan of action of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, in its Article 5 and 6, underlines the importance of safeguarding languages, particularly those in danger:

Safeguarding the linguistic heritage of humanity in giving support to expression, creation and dissemination in the greatest possible number of languages. Encouraging linguistic diversity – while respecting the mother tongue – at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the earliest age

(http://www.unesco.org/confgen/press_rel/021101_clt_diversity.shtml)

The International decade of the World's Indigenous People is now more than half way through its period. The education of indigenous peoples was given priority within the decade as UNESCO has been paying attention to the needs, rights and aspirations of the excluded indigenous and tribal peoples of the world. Together these groups represent some 350 million people world wide, speaking over 5000 languages. In many countries they make up the majority of the population. Even so, the cultural and ethnic minorities are the poorest segments of society, suffer the greatest discrimination, have the highest illiteracy rates, and they are mainly neglected.

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Activities for promoting indigenous knowledge are implemented through the programme on “Local and indigenous knowledge systems in a global society” (LINKS). The LINKS programme states that “traditional” knowledge is a key resource for sustainable development that empowers local and indigenous communities in their struggle against marginalization and impoverishment. The focal area for this action is to strengthen the dialogue between elders and youth to revitalize local and indigenous knowledge transmission, with special regard to formal and non-formal education.

Indigenous languages revitalization and development in China

China’s 56 national ethnic minorities communicate in many different tongues distinct to the region and local culture.

Apart from Chinese, there are around 120 minority languages that belong to five different language phyla. As the majority of these languages do not have writing systems, the role they play within their culture is unique and irreplaceable. With China’s market economy-oriented policy, the problem of endangered language has become more prominent, with over 20 languages facing the prospect of extinction. In another 30-40 languages the number of people speaking the language is declining rapidly with over half of these languages being spoken by no more than 10,000 people. The average age of speakers is also rising. UNESCO has been working with the department of Linguistic Research of the Institute of Nationality Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the effort to safeguard the endangered languages of China. Our efforts focus on:

- Extensive collection of data, with on-site investigation
- Recording language data, including data on language structure, phonological, lexical and grammatical features
- Investigating the feasibility of bilingual education, publications and other possible means of effectively countering the rapid disappearance of those languages with larger speaker populations.

Through the investigations, it is noted that these languages are quickly disappearing with the passing of the older generation and the changing values of the younger generation. Economic opportunity in urban areas, modern communication technology, and the development of society are emphasized as factors in their obliteration in rural communities. Rapid urbanization in recent decades has created a blatant divide in wealth, education, health care, and opportunity between urban and rural areas. Underprivileged regions stigmatized by society are further challenged by additional social and economic factors hindering development.

Among these many factors, the youth case has been drawing more and more of our attention: Young people are key for a language to survive to the next generation. Their active participation and interest is important for the continuation of the mother language. However, in their search for better living, they leave their hometown for the urban areas and in the process they lose interest in their mother language to acquire a basic standard of living:

Global economics are prompting the young to leave isolated villages ... for cities in search of better lives, leaving native tongues behind... Meanwhile, satellite TV and Internet are reaching into isolated areas (Dennis O Brien: Ancient tongues fade away:

http://www.nathpo.org/News/Language/News_Native-Languages16.htm

Absence of an effective strategy to attract young people in rural areas

Linguists blame the [loss of a language] on economic and social trends, politics, improved transportation and the global reach of telecommunications (Ibid).

Sometimes local policies kill a language. Minority language speakers go to school as children and see that success depends on learning one language in particular.

While dying languages should be recorded for historical study, local authorities are responding to political pressure with a kind of “cultural protectionism” by forcing languages on people who no longer have use for them

These are just two factors that threaten the long-term survival of indigenous language.

Our proposed solutions are:

- Introducing bilingual education to the indigenous people would not only revitalize their language, but also facilitate instruction for children who often enter the education system with a limited understanding of the standard national language.
- Revitalizing the cultural heritage of the indigenous people by stimulating quality production of arts and crafts would encourage greater financial independence and economic prosperity, contributing to the wealth of the region and society.

Through knowledge and awareness, these initiatives ultimately intend to strengthen a community by building upon resources already available. This closely aligns with the Chinese government’s goal to narrow the widening poverty gap.

Our main strategy focuses on the revitalization of endangered languages and the promotion of local arts and crafts to stimulate the economy and foster social development. The main activities are: (1) adoption of indigenous language into the educational system (2) identification of cultural heritage resources for development for underprivileged ethnic groups (generating income through cultural resources for social development). (3) promotion of indigenous arts and crafts through integrated artisan development projects.

Conclusion

Revitalizing indigenous languages is critical to strengthening many ethnic minority communities who struggle to retain their identity on the margins of society. They are challenged by conflicting traditional and foreign values and face discrimination that limits their opportunity for success. Maximizing the value of local traditions and increasing fiscal incentives will alleviate economic hardship and ensure responsible growth. This will in turn stimulate the interest of the young people. Initiatives that intend to revitalize indigenous languages and focus on long-term growth opportunities would resuscitate the local community and would enhance the quality of education through emphasis on local skills.

An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community (David Crystal: Why should we care?)
<http://books.cambridge.org/0521012716.htm>